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"What He Wanted Was Real Stories, but No One Would Listen": A Child's Literacy, a Mother's Understandings

Listening to the experiences and understandings of just one mother, brought important insights and changes in school literacy practices and relationships between parents and teacher.

Over the years [Brian] Street has repeatedly raised the question: When there are so many different types of literacy practices, why is it that school literacy has come to be seen as the defining form of reading and writing? He describes the "pedagogization" of literacy or the defining of literacy solely in terms of school-based notions of teaching and learning while marginalizing other forms of literacy.
Hull & Schultz (2007, p. 23)

Schools operate in deterministic discourses and practices that declare which literacy knowledge and skills are valued and which will determine success. Children whose home and family literacies are different than those normalized by school's white, middle class practices are often viewed as deficit by the institution. Mothers whose children are labeled "struggling readers" in school, often find their experiences trivialized and their voices silenced when they try to enter into equitable conversations with educators.

This article takes up the story of one such mother. Betty has three children, and I taught them all when I was a teacher in rural Nova Scotia, Canada. The article discusses Betty's knowledge of her son Paul as a literacy learner while at the same time raising important issues about what and who gets lost when we do not hear the voices and understandings of mothers.

THE STUDY: INTERROGATING THE "TAKEN FOR GRANTED"

This paper draws on a larger study I undertook for my dissertation. As part of my research, I sought to understand how school literacy practices worked to place children into categories of advantage or disadvantage in public schools. Presently, public school discourse posits disadvantage as something located outside of the school. It is usually attached to low socioeconomic status and is therefore regarded as something children bring to school. Public school discourse regarding disadvantage

is compensatory. It suggests that remedial reading programs, social intervention programs (e.g., Head Start, summer intercession, parenting courses), or breakfast clubs, to name only a few, should fix the problems and make children do better in school (Polakow, 1993; Primeaux, 2000).

I wanted to understand what school literacy practices were doing to create the inequities and the roles assigned to mothers in this process (Compton-Lilly, 2003, 2007; Finders, 1997; Hull & Schultz, 2007; Kersten, 2007). For example, when Norton-Meier (2005) discovered her kindergarten student (considered a struggling reader in school) to be confidently literate in the bar where his mother worked, her colleagues were quick to judge. They told Norton-Meier, "His mother is awful for letting him be in that environment" and "Reading beer labels is not literacy" (p. 287). Mother, child, and out-of-school literacies were all swiftly marginalized through the deterministic, powerful discourses of school's values and literacy practices. In the research presented here, I sought instead to learn from mothers about their understandings of their children as literacy learners both in and out of school.

This was a qualitative study in which I used a feminist post-structural analysis of identities to deconstruct the public school role for mothers. Listening to the stories and perspectives of mothers was critical to the research. I asked Betty and five other women who had children in the public school system to participate in a focus group. At the time the research took place, I was not teaching any of their children; however, at one time or another, the children of all the women had attended the rural school where I taught. Each of the mothers had at least one child who had been labeled a struggling reader by the school. We met for approximately three hours, once a month for two years. I asked the women to use this time to discuss the stories they cared about in relation to their children.

I also asked them to talk about their role in their children's school lives (Lareau, 1989; Silverman 2001). I audiotaped and transcribed all of the conversations. Additionally, I kept reflective notes following each of the meetings. As I sorted through the data, looking for themes and "the unexpected" in the mothers' stories, one resounding question surfaced time and time again. The mothers kept asking: "Why isn't someone listening to us?"

COMING TO THE RESEARCH

I was in my third year of teaching a multiaged (K–1) class in rural Nova Scotia when I met Betty. The school itself served nine small communities extending over a large geographic area. Many of the children attending the school came from families of low socioeconomic means. The school also had a high percentage of children who were labeled struggling readers. My first two years at the school had likewise been a struggle for me. I was a whole language teacher—a new phenomenon for parents at this school. It was not a pedagogy they were familiar with in their own school experiences, nor was it a pedagogy being practiced in the other classrooms at the school. Parents wanted to see worksheets and basal readers. They believed these things would help them know how their children were doing in school. Many of my students' parents had struggled or failed in school themselves. They were worried when they did not encounter the more traditional signifiers of success in my whole language classroom (Connell, 1985; Lareau, 2003; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Southgate, 2003).

Back to School Nights were constructed by my school and district as information sessions for parents. It was an opportunity to meet their child's teacher, to hear about the curriculum that would be covered, and to ask questions about the upcoming school year. On the Back to School night when I met Betty, I had decided to do something different. Rather than *tell* parents how their children would learn, I decided to show them. Drawing on the information I'd been collecting since early September, I read selections of their children's dialogue from my observation notes. I played the videotapes I'd recorded earlier in the day of their youngsters gathering in the story corner or chatting at the writing center. I displayed photos of the children taken while they

were at work and play. I offered copies of audio-taped transcriptions of their children's comments and questions during story and discussion time. I offered commentary and answered questions.

My goal was to bring parents on board and convince them that their children were learning in my whole language classroom. Although it was a different approach from what the school traditionally used, I was still assuming the position of expert on children's literacy learning. I was trying to impart my knowledge to those parents (primarily moms) who gathered in my room that night. At that point in my teaching career, it had not occurred to me that I had much to learn from mothers about literacy learning.

I was unprepared for the request I heard from the back of the room as our meeting drew to a close. One of the moms called out, "I want more of this!" Before the parents left that night, I agreed to meet with them on a monthly basis to share more of the same. An invitation was extended to all parents to join us for these meetings, but without exception, mothers were the only ones who attended.

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I had no model to follow for this new foray into relationships with parents. I was nervous about where it might lead. However, from the beginning it felt more hopeful to me than the resistance I'd experienced in my first two years at the school. Betty and 16 other mothers joined me as we made our way together in this new Parent–Teacher venture. My observation notes became dialogue journals that traveled between home and school. I typed up samples of my notes and sent them home to parents on a weekly basis. Most moms took up the invitation to respond, ask questions, or share observations about their children's learning and lives at home.

During our monthly meetings, I continued to show recent videos of the children in the classroom. To elicit different conversations, I also showed segments of such educational videos as *The Authoring Cycle* (Harste, Pierce, & Cairney, 1987). I lent articles or professional books (especially from the *Bright Ideas* series published then by Scholastic) to anyone who wished to read them. I continued to create photograph albums, and every child had a turn taking home these snapshots of school life. Monthly meetings were filled with conversations, which grew more

comfortable and familiar as we got to know one another through shared stories about the children at home and school (Klassen-Endrizzi, 2004).

"I DIDN'T WANT THE SYSTEM TO HAVE HIM BY THE END OF THE YEAR"

Betty's son Paul was in my whole language classroom when I first began to meet with parents on this new and more frequent basis. Betty accepted each and every invitation I extended to parents. She was often the first to arrive at our monthly meetings, helping me make coffee as we prepared for the arrival of the others. Once all of the moms had gathered in the classroom, Betty eagerly watched the videos of the children I'd taken that day. She was anxious to connect the names Paul would mention at the supper table with the faces on the television screen. She introduced herself to the other moms, sharing stories and asking questions about their children's experiences. She filled her journal with observations, responses, questions, and sometimes her worries about Paul. It was in one of her earliest journal entries Betty wrote:

It was my knowing that his uniqueness, need for activity and different interests would not fit the institution of present schooling that had me concerned from the beginning. I didn't want the system to "have him by the end of the year" as I have been told.

Betty demonstrated her knowledge of her son as a learner through her many visits to our classroom. She urged me to open the classroom doors to parents in ways I could never have imagined feeling comfortable with. For her part, Betty brought Paul's activities and interests into the classroom to share with all the children who wished to participate. Under her knowledgeable, caring tutelage, the children became eager scientists. They spent time exploring the many colorful information books Betty found at the public library. They enthusiastically worked beside Betty creating their own volcanoes, hurricanes, and weather centers. They recorded their observations and findings in journals, all the while actively moving about the classroom, making predictions and sharing their discoveries with others. Sometimes the birth of a new farm animal at Paul's house would find us all in the schoolyard gathered

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around Betty and the new baby goat, puppy, or chickens. At Paul's insistence, she carefully drove the new bundles to school, so he could share the stories of the new arrivals and his participation in these exciting and important events.

The small farm that Paul's family shared with the rest of us became a gathering place for class picnics and get-togethers. While the moms, who were once strangers, shared laughter, concerns and hopes for their children, and their new relationship with school, we all watched as Paul led the children on informative tours of his beloved farm. The goats, the horses, the dogs, and the plots of strawberry fields were only some of the stops Paul's classmates made as he patiently explained about the care required for each and every animal and plant they encountered.

THE FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS: "IS IT LITERACY FOR LIFE?"

I looked to Betty and other moms like her to form the focal group for my research. (I will call this "the focus group" in the remainder of my article.) These women had shown they wanted to be involved in their children's school lives. It was also clear that they wanted to share what they knew about their children as learners with the school. Moreover, they all had concerns that their children's home experiences would not be understood or valued by the school.

Brandt's (2001) study of the life-literacy stories of 80 Americans born in different generations and locations elucidates how literacy is lived in everyday lives. Her study shows the disparity between the literacy teachings of public schools, the ways literacy is used in real lives, and the ways literacy will be needed in a rapidly changing world. She writes:

We should not only recognize how stigmatized groups go about accumulating literacy despite discrimination but also dedicate resources of the democratic school more wholly to their cause. Above all, in matters of literacy, we should consider the problems not only of deficit but of surplus. This includes acknowledging the ideological congestion that hangs at the scenes of literacy learning and forms much of the mystery in learning to read and write. It also includes acknowledging how often the

literacy skills that exist in American lives languish for lack of adequate sponsorship. (p. 205)

The mystery of learning to read and write at school was a topic that came up frequently among the mothers during focus group meetings. One evening, when one of the moms relayed worries about her son's struggles with reading in his third-grade classroom, the others were quick to offer empathy and support. Many suggestions were offered, such as reading to him about things he liked, allowing him to buy his beloved Pokémon books, getting him started on a particular reading series, or just explaining to his teacher that he was young for third grade and that his reading would get better as he was supported at home and at school.

As Betty participated in this conversation, she shared a story of her own. She told us that Paul had also struggled with reading in school, in spite of the fact he had been read to each night. Betty had read him *Winnie the Pooh*, nursery rhymes, *Peter Pan*, and other children's fairy tales. But Paul was not interested in those books. She told us:

And Paul, when he was really little and we were reading books, that was the first thing he would ask. Could that really happen Mommy? He needed to know if that could really happen. And it was like . . . I thought . . . oh my god, I'm ok. My son's just like that. And I remember we read him all those little airy-fairy things.

When Betty says "I'm ok, my son's just like that," she is telling us that reading to Paul as a pre-schooler validated her understanding that some readers just cannot go to some of the places expected by authors and by schools. Betty went on to share with us how, as a reader, she herself could not relate to fantasy books. Referring to the year she had to study *The Hobbit*, she said, "I just could not get my head to go there." In a moment of sincere honesty, she told us, "I wondered what was wrong with me."

As Paul's question "Can that really happen?" demonstrates, some readers need things to be real. The "airy-fairy things" (fanciful, imaginative stories) do not work for some children. For Paul, whose young life and passion was all about the family farm and the animals on it, the planting of crops and the

work that went with it, life was not fantasy. Life was about very real things. Austin, Dwyer, & Freebody (2003) write: "Child readers are expected to treat as plausible (or appear to treat as plausible) the idea that animals can talk, just as they are elsewhere expected to treat as plausible the idea that these books describe everyday life" (p. 118).

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When I was Paul's teacher, it had never occurred to me that the reason he might not have been interested in the many books we shared and the many discussions that ensued as a class was because he was not interested in the "airy-fairy"

books so many of us loved. Although I was careful to include many books about farms and rural life in the classroom library, many of those texts still expected readers to make sense of clothed and talking animals as well as human-type relationships among non-human characters.

Many classrooms are filled with books or basal readers where animals are talking, singing, and dancing. Tests that measure comprehension and grade-level reading success at school expect children to make sense of such fantasies as real. Reading workbooks, homework assignments, readers theatre dialogues, standardized tests, end-of-chapter writing exercises, and themed unit activities often require that, to meet with success, children have to get their heads to "go there"—something Betty could not do when she read *The Hobbit*.

As his teacher, I had assumed Paul's lack of interest in reading had to do with the fact that coming from an extraordinarily busy household, he probably didn't get read to very much. Betty's conversation, however, revealed that Paul was read to copiously, though even as a toddler he resisted fairy tales. This helped me realize that the books he wanted to hear about were in scant supply in the classroom; as a result, I invited the mothers to help me shop for such books for the classroom library.

"I DECIDED I NEEDED TO STAY AWAY"

Betty's beliefs that Paul's uniqueness and interests would not fit the institution proved to be true when Paul was labeled a struggling reader shortly after he left my classroom. He encountered a much narrower view of how one learns to read when he entered second grade. This perspective allowed Paul no time to find his way. His avoid-

ance of basal reading material deemed appropriate for his grade level placed Paul on the list of reluctant/struggling readers. The selection of texts chosen to teach Paul to read never came under scrutiny. This left Betty struggling. She knew Paul was on a secure path as a growing reader at home, yet she seemed unable to access the language that could persuade the school that the knowledge she had was valid and important (Lareau, 2003).

When Paul's second-grade teacher referred him for testing, Betty was summoned to the school. The classroom teacher and the Resource Teacher wanted to share their findings and make recommendations for intervention. They wanted Paul to leave his classroom to participate in a remedial reading program with other struggling readers in the Resource Room. They needed Betty's permission to make this happen. She would not give it and her efforts to explain why she knew this would not be good for Paul were not heard. Each time Betty entered the school, Paul's teacher, the Resource teacher, or the administrator approached her, begging her to reconsider. Sometimes in one visit, all three would urge her to change her mind and allow Paul to be withdrawn from the classroom for concentrated, corrective reading instruction. Recalling these experiences at a focus group meeting, Betty exclaimed: "I became overwhelmed. Flabbergasted. I decided I needed to stay away."

Finders and Lewis (1994) write:

The institutional view of nonparticipating parents remains based on a deficit model. "Those who need to come, don't come," a teacher explains, revealing an assumption that one of the main reasons for involving parents is to remediate them. It is assumed that involved parents bring a body of knowledge about the purposes of schooling to match institutional knowledge. Unless they bring such knowledge to the school, they themselves are thought to need education in becoming legitimate participants. (§ 4)

Betty had solid knowledge of her son as a literacy learner, but it did not match institutional knowledge. Her story helps us see that parents who do not come to school are not necessarily staying away because they do not care or because they do not want to participate. Betty chose to stay away because she was not valued for what she knew about her child. Juxtaposed with school knowledge, the knowledge she had of Paul was

diminished. Betty believed that by staying away, she would no longer be pressured to do something that she believed was not in her son's best interests. She *knew* Paul should not be withdrawn from his classroom environment to receive a piecemeal skill and drill approach to reading. Nevertheless, she was intimidated by the repeated implications that she did not know what was best for her son.

Foucault (1977) says, "It is in the discourse that power and knowledge are joined together" (p. 100). The discourse of school is powerful; it claimed all-important knowledge about Paul as a reader. Administrators, teachers, and specialists such as the Resource Teacher have access to institutional discourses. Backed by tests and assessments, school personnel can use institutional discourses liberally to describe students like Paul. How can a mother's knowledge compete? Betty's voice was disregarded and silenced at school. Ultimately, she stayed away, avoiding any confrontations where she was pushed to reconsider her decisions about Resource support.

Betty's story offers some important glimpses into understandings we need to work toward if we truly want to open our doors to the parents we do not see. Paul has become a strong independent reader. Betty told us he did not read a book until he was in fourth grade, but then he found a series that he liked, and once he started to read, he never stopped. Glancing around her book-filled den as she spoke, Betty said: "He reads more than most kids his age. There is always at least one book lying around here that he is reading. It just takes time, lots of books, and patience."

"SCHOOL-MOMS": ORIGINS OF THE ROLE

There is little evidence that prior to the 1960s, parents were expected to play an active role in their children's school lives. However, this changed dramatically over the past few decades. As class sizes increased and financial support for public schools declined, teachers and schools looked more and more to the home for support in areas such as homework, classroom volunteering, chauffeuring, secretarial work, and financial contributions (Dudley-Marling, 2001). Mothers from middle class homes responded initially to calls for help from their children's schools. They had the time and resources to give. In their study of schools' expectations of mothers, Smith and Griffith (Smith, 1998) discovered as many as 60 women volunteering at any given time in the middle class school their children attended. This unpaid labor and time donated

by middle class moms created the assumption that volunteer work was simply part of the fabric of a good school and good parenting. Over time, schools began to view the contributions of mothers as normative practices, and they relied on the donations of time and resources as part of their everyday operations. Schools where mothers could not volunteer or help their children with schoolwork at home viewed themselves as deficit and the parents as non-caring (Biklen, 1995; David, 1998; Gilles, 2006; Lareau, 1989; Reay, 1998, 2007; Smith, 1987, 1998, 2000).

Today curricular statements, policy documents, PTA mission statements, and school newsletters give textual evidence that parents are indeed expected to participate in their children's school lives. The partnerships being advocated by government officials and educational policy makers assume that "... 'parents' should be available both at home and in the school to work with their children in support of their education" (Standing, 1999, p. 57). The highest expectations for parental contributions to their children's school success are found in the areas of homework and reading support. In eastern Canada where I taught, The Atlantic Canada Language Arts Curriculum Guide (1995) proclaimed the relationship between parents and schools as one of partnership in literacy education. Parents were named to the role of supporters of teachers and curriculum. These sorts of institutional documents work to create particular kinds of relationships between parents and school professionals. The expectations of parental involvement are narrowly defined in these documents and can be seen as primarily benefiting teachers and the school.

Lareau (1992) found that parents' roles were legitimized only through discourses of support and positive involvement. While appearing to offer equity and communication between home and school, the reality is that the institutionally constructed parent-teacher partnerships adhered to in most public schools create a hierarchy where schools hold the knowledge that is to be imparted to the parents (Klassen-Endrizzi, 2004).

THE COMPLEXITIES OF CHANGE

When I first changed my approach to the annual Back to School Night and responded to mothers' requests for more meetings and new kinds of access to the classroom, I had an agenda that perpetuated the hierarchal view of "teacher as expert." I had hoped I could convince parents that my

whole language theory and practices were sound and that their children were learning. At the same time, I'd even been optimistic that the moms would come to know the pedagogy well enough to speak from understandings themselves. I anticipated they might want to describe their children as holistic learners as they moved on to more traditional classroom settings. Betty's story shows the naivety of my agenda and reveals the well-intentioned expectations I had concerning the power of mothers' voices. Her story also shows how much I had to learn from mothers about their children's literacy. My own holistic approaches had not made adequate space or provided support for the home literacies so completely lived by Paul and many other children in my classroom.

Luke (in Pahl & Rowsell, 2005) writes:

Change in literacy education is about change in the material worlds of social life. And it is the new lived experiences and histories of childhood, work, and leisure that are the real educational challenges of this millennium—not phonics or scripted reading programs. (p. xii)

Paul, and indeed all of the children who attended this rural school, came from homes surrounded by nature of all kinds. Most of these young people spent their days and evenings by the ocean, fishing or exploring; in the forest, cutting wood, hunting, building lean-tos; on the flatlands, playing, raising animals, and growing vegetables for families to use or sell. Then they came to a school, where a patriarchal, white, middle class literacy curriculum determined what they should read, when they should read it, and how they should go about reading it. This same curriculum and its corresponding assessments then judged them to be successes or failures as literate human beings.

Connell (1993) and Eisner (2003) have shown that in more than a century (since the time they have been in existence), public schools have changed or improved very little in their discourses or practices. Institutional assumptions about how learning takes place and what is important to learn have not ventured very far from their initial beginnings in the nineteenth century. And it is these literacy practices that trap children in the past, as Brandt (2001) has shown. Reading and writing in the great majority of school practices bear little resemblance to the lived literate lives we enact as human beings in the world outside of school today.

DISCOURSES FOR CHANGE

Betty tried hard to ensure there was a match between her son's lived literacy experiences at home and those he encountered in school. Gee (2004) writes: "When people learn something as a cultural process their bodies are involved because cultural learning always involves having specific experiences that facilitate learning, not just memorizing words" (p. 39). The goats, the chickens, the visits to Paul's farm, the information books about real things that Betty frequently carried into our classroom were all demonstrations of her understandings of how experiences facilitate literacy learning. The worries she had about Paul from the beginning, about his active ways and unique interests not fitting school as she knew it, were well founded, and she did everything in her power to change the course of the history she feared.

Kersten (2007) writes: "... at the turn of the 21st century, the disconnect between schooling and children, predominantly those considered marginalized or without access to the dominant culture, has become a chasm" (p. 134). Until we redefine the role of mothers and their knowledge in our schools, it is unlikely this will change much. In spite of all I *thought* I knew about the importance of making personal connections in supporting the young literacy learners in my classroom, it was Betty who pushed me to examine my assumptions further. Austin, Dwyer, & Freebody (2001) provoked me to think about the kinds of expectations I put on children's talk in the classroom and the kinds of assumptions I make about what children are able to understand when they read the books I choose for them. However, it was Betty and other mothers who brought these understandings to life when they brought the artifacts of their children's situated learning histories into the classroom and helped me shop for classroom library books that represented their children's literate lives.

It is important to ask the question: how many children would not be a statistic among the reported three million learning disabled American children if school literacy discourses and practices changed to include and build on the situated learning histories of all children (Hicks, 2002)? We know that in institutional life, change is never easy. Eisner (2003) showed us this. When a mother does not want to enter the discourses of schooling that define her children in unfamiliar or deficit ways (Tuten, 2007), she is left without a

discourse that enables others to address the child's reality (Davies, 1993).

Betty's story offers poignant examples of the resistance of institutional discourses and practices to mothers' knowledge, experiences, and language. As Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003), Smith (1998), and Taylor (1991) have shown, it is stressful and difficult for parents to explain what they know and to advocate for their children in systems that have subordinated their knowledge for decades. However, stories like these also offer both insights and hope. They are the stories we need to draw on as we work to bring about change. For example, Klassen-Endrizzi's (2004) study describes paradigm shifts that must take place if we are to begin talking, listening, and learning sincerely with parents. She writes: "... teachers began to value the literate ways of their students' families as they saw examples of functional literacy throughout home life" (p. 327). Remember how Betty reflected on her son as a reader each and every time she read to him at home? She knew he would read, and to any teacher who listened, she would have shared her understandings of how best to support him in his journey.

Norton-Meier (2005) notes that the lessons about literacy she learned from her five-year-old student, Aaron, stayed with her when she became a teacher educator. As she retells her story of Aaron to her preservice teachers, she focuses on showing them the importance of learning about literacy learning from children. Like Norton-Meier, I am now sharing my story of learning with preservice and inservice teachers in the university classes I teach.

I left the public school system in Canada seven years ago and am currently teaching reading methods classes and graduate literacy seminars in southern California. I continue to learn from Betty's story and from the multitude of experiences she and the other mothers made possible for the children and for me. My course readings always include thought-provoking readings about the role of parents in the school. Students are expected to provide written responses to these articles and to engage in discussion about them in class. I have created scenarios based on what I have learned from my focus group moms. These scenarios allow students to imagine, discuss, and sometimes argue about what they will do when and if they encounter particular situations that keep parents away from their future classrooms. The students' conversations are often heated and passionate.

They reveal assumptions embedded in school's historical expectations for parents (Hicks, 2002). They sometimes reveal personal experiences about situations that kept their own moms out of school. Listening and talking to one another helps these soon-to-be teachers produce new understandings and places to consider for action when they have classrooms of their own.

CONCLUSIONS: "I WANT MORE OF THIS!"

Teachers in Canada and the United States are under different kinds of stresses than they were when I first listened to mothers' requests for access to their children's classroom. Today's teachers are all too rarely afforded respect and time to learn from mothers or students. Reading programs of different sorts (many of them tightly scripted) have been mandated throughout the US and Canada. Professional autonomy so enjoyed by many teachers in the '80s and '90s is a thing of the past. It is often not easy for preservice or inservice teachers to imagine anything other than the old model of parent-teacher relationships in their practice. Scripted programs require that meaningless, decodable books be practiced at home at night. Reading school texts is required homework, and passing fluency tests that measure no more than the speed with which a child can say the words, becomes a focus for reporting success or failure to parents.

In such a world, there is more need than ever to listen to the experiences and knowledge of mothers. Teachers have access to institutional discourses and practices by the very nature of their role within that institution. They are in positions to use their access to these discourses and practices to bring change. For example, though they may look different than they did when Betty and the other moms first met me at Back to School Night, those mandated evenings still exist. They can become, instead, a forum for conversations that invite the voices and experiences of parents to count in meaningful ways. Home-school journals can take the form of written conversations between mothers and teachers. These conversations could focus on observing and celebrating the literate lives of children both in and out of school. Such dialogues can offer teachers new understandings of their students' rich literate lives and a new discourse with which to speak them into existence at the school. Volunteer work at home and school is still an expectation placed on parents of children attending schools today. These can be places to invite parents to

"cross the threshold of the school" (Norton-Meier, p. 289) and share their own stories and experiences.

Today's schools often prevent the home literacies of students from entering the classroom, whether these home literacies are video games, Pokémon cards, or information books and artifacts about things that are real to children's lives. In their haste to make children literate through skill and drill exercises, reading curricula leave no space for the real-life literacies of the students. But teachers are in a position to open the door (even if just a little) to mothers, who might take up the invitation to bring the outside world into the classroom and show in powerful ways that we have much to learn from them.

Advocating for a model of teaching that is dynamic and not embedded in unrelenting assumptions about learning that have existed in our schools for more than a century now, Greene (2008) says: "... teaching for social justice differs from situation to situation and evolves over time" (p. 20). Making spaces for voices and life literacies that have historically been marginalized through school's hegemonic discourses and practices is a social justice agenda. And as Greene says, how we take up that agenda very much depends on where we are in our teaching. Wherever we may begin with such an agenda, we—parents and educators—become active participants in how it will evolve.

When I first responded to the requests of Betty and the other mothers who wanted to broaden their role of mother in our school, I had no way of knowing where this new experience would take us. As we worked together to understand what that role might become, relationships changed and boundaries shifted (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; White, 1994; White, 2005). New voices were heard, and I began to realize the depth of knowledge these women had about their children's learning. It was learning I had not previously made space for in my practice (Allen, 2007; Klassen-Endrizzi, 2004).

Today, these mothers continue to inform my practice. Every day that I share their stories, reflect again on all that we did together, or answer my students' questions about these moms, I learn something new. As Greene has said, situations change, and the same spaces may not be as available to teachers as they once were to me. However, as the preservice teachers in my classes listen and inquire of the stories of Betty and other mothers, they begin to understand the importance of including the lived experiences of their

students in their literacy teaching. They begin to imagine how they will take all that moms like Betty have to teach them into their twenty-first century classrooms. I tell them I hope the kinds of experiences they make possible for parents will allow them to hear the eager words, "I want more of this!" from optimistic moms and dads. It is a journey of learning that must not be missed.

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